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10-16-2008

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Lee, Haiyan, "Painted Skin: To Scare or Not to Scare?" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 296.
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Painted Skin: To Scare or Not to Scare?

October 16, 2008 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

By Haiyan Lee

It may come as a surprise that movies about ghosts and monsters are strictly speaking illegal in China, a land that has given us such an enchanting array of supernatural figures as the White Serpent Lady, the Weaving Girl, the three-headed Nuozha, and, of course, the delightful trickster Monkey. Gods and ghosts do show up on the Chinese screen, but they have to be framed as “characters” of folklore or fanciful creations of the “primitive” mind, something of ethnographic interest but no longer relevant to our sense of self and world. However, if they end up unsettling our secular confidence in science and rationality, they have then crossed over into the forbidden terrain of “evil cults” 邪教 or “superstitions” 迷信.

To be sure, spectral or paranormal themes have long invaded written genres and are alive and kicking right under the nose of state censors—consider, e.g., the cult phenomenon of the *Ghost Blows out the Light* 《鬼吹灯》 series. The fact that the series could flaunt the word ghost in its very title is an indication of the relative anarchy of the Internet and commercial publishing, though reportedly all traces of the supernatural had to be removed from the printed editions following the title’s [runaway online success](#). The state seems far more vigilant about the visual media and has recently tightened its grip on films with pronounced supernatural contents or unduly spooky mis-en-scenes, lines, and sound effects. So far, only the director A Gan 阿甘 has had some success plumbing the nebulous depths of official regulations with a succession of low-tech domestic “[haunted house](#)” [productions](#) 国产恐怖片. But these would probably be considered small fry by Hong Kong, Hollywood, or J-horror standards.

For filmmakers with cross-border commercial ambitions, maneuvering Chinese censorship is a touch and go affair. The ghost genre is without doubt one of the glories of Hong Kong cinema, and yet today’s investors are reluctant to put money down on a film that cannot be screened in mainland China, where the lion’s share of the Chinese-language film market is, even with rampant piracy factored in. This was the snag, according to a *Southern Weekend* 《南方周末》 report, that the Hong Kong director Andy Chin Wing-Keung 錢永強 ran into when he first conceived of the idea of remaking the 1965 horror classic *Painted Skin* 《画皮》 using [cutting-edge CGI technology](#). The earlier version, directed by Bao Fong 鲍方, is adapted from a macabre tale in the ur-collection of Chinese ghost stories, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* 《聊斋志异》, about the fatal seduction of a scholar by a



ghoul who dresses itself up in a painted human skin. It was

released on the mainland in 1979 and initiated a whole generation of mainlanders to the shuddering pleasures of the horror flick. (It was eventually banned after rumors began to circulate about its lethal impact on the faint-hearted.)

The blockbuster that eventually greeted holiday crowds during the October Golden Week in honor of National Day (October 1) bears little resemblance to the 1965 version. Directed by Gordon Chan Kar-Seung 陳嘉上, it has a star-studded cast headed by the Hong Kong action film veteran Donnie Yen 甄子丹 (poster 1; [watch a trailer](#)). But its highly recognizable title alone brought with it not just a default fan base, but also the itching expectations that audiences bring to all *soi-disant* horror movies: to be scared out of one's wits. Instead, they were doused with a sodden romance spruced up with some martial arts fights, desert combats in ancient armors, and bantering partnership between two demon-quellers. What should have been the most hair-raising scene, when the demon (a fox spirit in this version) peels off her skin for a repaint, a scene that lasts just a few seconds but allegedly cost millions of yuan to create, wrung little more than a few gasps out of the audience in a Causeway Bay theater where I saw the movie. The defrocked demon is shown to be crawling with a gazillion dark worms from head to toe, but once the camera pulls back, it simply looks like an overly wired-up space alien in a sci-fi film. Creepy? Yes, but far from terrifying.

The only moments when one is reminded that this is supposed to be a "scary movie," oddly enough, come in the erotic scenes in which the male lead's sexual fantasy transgresses moral boundaries and both he and the audience are jolted (out of his bed and our seats, respectively) with a loud thump from the nondiegetic soundtrack (i.e., sounds that are not internal to the scene). Such lame attempts at horror effects make us wonder if Chinese/Hong Kong filmmakers are truly hamstrung by censorship, or perhaps if there are things other than having one's hair stand on end, even when it concerns the supernatural, that truly engross the Chinese audience.

Come to think of it, even the original story (composed or recorded) by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 isn't very scary either, at least not in the order of such Western classics as *Dracula*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and Edgar Allan Poe's noir tales. Of course, Chinese ghost stories also play with liminality, the in-between space between the living and dead, humans and animals, mortals and immortals, or more broadly, self and other. The attraction for the strange and otherworldly and the traffic between divergent worlds are what turn life upside down. However, there are two features that are common to Chinese ghost stories and may have the effect of offsetting their horror quotient in the eyes of the hardened horror addict. The first is the moral imperative of cosmic resolution. Although the genre is teeming with amorous fox spirits 狐狸精 and revenant ghosts 幽靈, the moral message seldom turns on romantic freedom, but rather on the necessity to balance yin and yang, or the destructive and the generative forces of the cosmos. Ghosts, spirits, and fairies are yin creatures who should stay put in their yin domains. Their stealing into the bedchambers (as well as heart chambers) of young scholars upsets the cosmic balance and visits disaster of one kind or another on human society. They must therefore be exorcised by Taoist or Buddhist priests who are in touch with the occult workings of the shadowy realms. The showdown between the demon 魔 and the priest 道 is called "the sorcery contest" (斗法) and invariably ends with the banishment of the spectral interloper.

But the demon invariably returns, with ever naughtier tricks: 道高一尺, 魔高一丈 (if the righteous force grows by one foot, the demonic force will rise by ten). Nonetheless, the difference between good and evil is a matter of degree, rather than of essence. The demon is not a figure of existential enigma or radical evil (as embodied, most recently, by the bounty hunter in *No Country for Old Men* and by Kant's murderous butler in *Critique of Criminal Reason: A Mystery*); it does not radically call into question our humanity or fundamental cosmic justice. The perduring humanism is indeed the second feature of the Chinese ghost genre. The were-animals and the undead who are caught mingling with humans are not always malicious beings bent upon destruction for its own sake. Rather, they are among us because they are achingly jealous of the simple joys and happiness of ordinary human life that are not (or no longer) available to them however omnipotent they may be. Thus they undergo years of assiduous cultivation and endure the risk and humiliation of exposure, so as to assume the human form and join the human community.

Their quest is tragically doomed because as yin creatures, they cannot properly belong to the human world without undermining, in spite of themselves, precisely what is sought after: love, care, and fellowship. The decomposition always starts with the very men who mediate their passage to humanity and who, in this process, are sapped of their yang essence. Such is the fate of the White Serpent Lady 白蛇娘娘, who falls in love with a handsome scholar, marries him, supports him financially, and bears him children, while all along having to evade and resist the self-righteous priest who hunts her down in the name of manhood and the yang social order.

The new *Painted Skin* modernizes the Confucian brand of humanism by defining humanity in sentimental terms, that is, by equating humanity with romantic love, and a gender-equalized kind to boot (poster 2). As one commentator pointed out, despite the propaganda hype about its being “an



Eastern supernatural fantasy” 东方魔幻, at its core the movie is a triangular love affair, except that the “third party” 第三者/小三 is a shape-shifting fox spirit who requires a steady diet of human hearts to keep its coat of human skin forever **fresh and young**. We do see her gouge out the hearts of two men right through their breastplates. But a regular supply of hearts is maintained by her henchman and unrequited lover the lizard spirit—also in human form. Most of the time, she is just a doe-eyed girl pining for love. And it is this consuming passion that endows her with a measure of humanity, so much so that we are almost willing to forgive her ghastly alimentary habit—especially since the victims largely remain faceless and the killings are done in the name of love. Her monstrosity is mitigated by her yearning for the hero and her single-minded, even ruthless, devotion to him, to the point that she actually resurrects him so that he may be reunited with his true love—his wife. In this capacity she has more in common with the “creature” in the novel *Frankenstein* or the ape in the film *King Kong* than with the elusive, haunting specters of psychological suspense thrillers.

The idea that supernatural entities—objects of awe and worship—would be so jealous of our humanity and would go to such destructive lengths to partake of it is perhaps what saves *Painted Skin* from being a total flop. For all its failure to deliver a spook fest, it has been doing quite well at the box office and has received plenty of thumbs up for its extravagant love fest. The censors, apparently, had no problem with the triangle romance, probably owing to the fact that the dashing hero remains fiercely loyal to his wife, even while he is clearly bewitched by the fox spirit-turned-delicate beauty. A situation that would typically have been resolved by the practice of polygamy—indeed the girl repeatedly begs to be taken in as a concubine—is here turned into an opportunity to shore up heterosexual monogamy and conjugal love. In the end, the girl vanishes in a puff of air (and returns to her fox form) and everyone is happy ever after.

However, in granting a shape-shifting seductress such a prominent screen position and in allowing her to win audience sympathy through an underlying humanism, the censors might be going out on a limb (poster 3). David Ownby tells us that Falun Gong 法轮功, the proscribed spiritual movement that



started out as a collective deep breathing exercise known as qigong气功, is the revenge of popular religion on the arrogance of the Party-State and modernizing elites who thought they could turn qigong into a “Chinese science” by disembedding it from the web of [folk religious beliefs and practices](#). Amorous ghosts and spirits, too, are not the unattached loners they may appear to be. As they enchant and frighten us in the same abated breath, they smuggle into our world alternative values and visions of the world. And as such they may not always be so serviceable to our secular agendas. We don’t always know what can happen when the genie is let out of the bottle.

{Readers interested in the Chinese fox lore can consult *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative* by Rania Huntington (Harvard U Asia Center, 2003); those interested in the relationship between modernity and romantic love might check out the latest issue (16:2) of *positions: east asia cultures critique*, “Taking It to Heart: Emotion, Asia, Modernity,” guest-edited by Haiyan Lee.}